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FAA Orders Inspections of 471 Boeing 737 MAX Jets for Possible Structural Cracks; 737s Serve USVI

With Boeing 737 aircraft regularly serving the U.S. Virgin Islands, the FAA's new order carries local relevance as 471 U.S.-registered 737 MAX jets face inspections for possible cracking near the forward galley door; no MAX cracks have been reported.

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The Federal Aviation Administration has ordered mandatory inspections of 471 U.S.-registered Boeing 737 MAX aircraft for possible cracking in a structural reinforcement near the forward galley door, after similar cracks were discovered on older versions of the 737. The directive covers certain Boeing 737-8, 737-9 and 737-8200 aircraft and takes effect September 10. It does not order the aircraft grounded, and the FAA says no cracks have been reported in the same area on 737 MAX airplanes.

The action carries relevance for U.S. Virgin Islands air travelers because Boeing 737 aircraft are part of current air service into the territory. Southwest Airlines began serving Cyril E. King Airport on St. Thomas in February 2026, and the carrier operates an all-Boeing fleet consisting entirely of variations of the 737. At the end of 2025, Southwest operated 803 Boeing 737 aircraft, including 300 Boeing 737-8 aircraft, the MAX 8 model included in the FAA directive.

That connection, however, does not establish that any aircraft currently operating to St. Thomas is among the 471 affected airplanes. The FAA directive identifies aircraft according to Boeing's technical requirements bulletin rather than by the routes they operate, and it does not identify particular airports or passenger flights. The order therefore should not be interpreted as a finding that a 737 MAX serving the Virgin Islands has developed the cracking condition.

Cracks Found Near Forward Galley Door on Older 737s

At issue is a structural reinforcement known as the bear strap at the forward upper corner of the forward galley door opening. The FAA said it had received reports of cracks in that area on Boeing 737-600, -700, -700C, -800, -900 and -900ER aircraft, collectively part of the older 737 Next Generation family.

Boeing's investigation determined that high operating stresses in the fuselage skin and bear strap, concentrated around the corner of the door opening, caused the cracks found on those older planes. The FAA said that if the condition is not addressed and a crack grows sufficiently, a principal structural element could lose its ability to withstand required loads, affecting the structural integrity of the aircraft.

The FAA emphasized a significant distinction between those earlier findings and its new MAX directive: no cracks have been reported in the same area on the 737 MAX fleet. Regulators nevertheless determined that the MAX has a sufficiently similar design and manufacturing process to the older aircraft that the same condition could potentially develop.

CBS News reported that the FAA estimates the directive affects 471 aircraft registered in the United States and 1,429 airplanes worldwide. Boeing told CBS that it initially informed operators of its 737 Next Generation aircraft about the issue in 2019 and later extended the recommended inspections to 737 MAX airplanes because of similarities in their design and construction.

The FAA had already acted on the older-generation aircraft. In April 2024, the agency issued an airworthiness directive covering the affected 737 Next Generation models and requiring inspections of the fuselage skin and bear strap around the same forward galley door location, along with additional investigative and corrective work when necessary.

What Airlines Are Required to Inspect

The new MAX directive begins with an external visual examination of the fuselage skin to determine whether repairs have previously been made in the affected area. What happens after that initial inspection depends on the aircraft's condition and what inspectors find.

The Boeing procedures adopted by the FAA provide for several additional forms of inspection when applicable. These include detailed checks for cracks in the fuselage skin; high-frequency eddy-current inspections around certain fasteners and along the fuselage skin and bear strap at the door-corner radius; and low-frequency eddy-current inspections beneath the surface of the bear strap at specified fastener locations.

Those inspections may have to be repeated at intervals established in Boeing's requirements bulletin. If inspectors find cracking, repairs must be performed using an approved method. Aircraft with existing repairs in the area may also require alternative inspection procedures.

The FAA's final rule incorporates Boeing Alert Requirements Bulletin 737-53A1408 RB, dated December 20, 2024, which establishes the inspection procedures and applicable compliance periods. The directive applies only to the 737-8, 737-9 and 737-8200 aircraft identified by that Boeing bulletin — not automatically to every MAX aircraft in service.

FAA Says Inspection Schedule Provides Time to Detect Cracks

The inspection mandate had been moving through the federal regulatory process since last year. The FAA proposed the directive in November 2025 before issuing the final rule this week. Boeing supported the proposed directive without requesting changes.

During the public-comment process, the Foundation for Aviation Safety questioned how Boeing and the FAA were addressing the root cause and why inspections were not required sooner if a structural crack could eventually become serious enough to require an aircraft to be removed from service.

The FAA responded that the inspection and repair intervals were established using Boeing's findings across the 737 fleet, engineering analysis and the potential safety consequences if cracking were allowed to grow beyond a critical length. Regulators said the schedule provides multiple opportunities to find and repair cracking before that point and concluded that the compliance periods provide an acceptable level of safety.

The agency also said Boeing is making changes to its manufacturing process intended to address the underlying cause on aircraft still in production.

United Airlines separately raised questions during the rulemaking process about how certain previously completed fuselage and bear-strap repairs should be treated. The FAA determined that the provision applies to any repair, including certain blend-out repairs permitted under the structural repair manual, and said some repaired areas may require shorter repetitive-inspection intervals depending on the findings.

No Immediate Grounding Ordered

Unlike an emergency grounding, the new directive permits affected aircraft to continue operating while airlines comply with the inspection schedule prescribed by the FAA and Boeing. The agency's final rule requires operators to perform the work within the specified compliance periods and complete any necessary corrective action.

Southwest Airlines, one of the largest U.S. operators of the 737 MAX and now a carrier serving St. Thomas, told CBS News that it was reviewing the directive and would perform the required inspections according to the FAA's schedule.

United Airlines similarly told CBS that it did not anticipate any near-term effect on its operations and expected to perform the inspections during heavy-maintenance visits. The carrier said its oldest MAX aircraft have not accumulated enough flight cycles for the inspections to become due immediately.

That distinction is important for travelers: the FAA has identified a potential structural condition that requires inspection, not announced that cracks have been found throughout the MAX fleet. The regulator's November proposal specifically stated that no cracks had been reported in the affected areas of MAX aircraft but concluded that the similarity in design and construction justified extending mandatory inspections to them.

Costs Could Rise if Repairs Are Needed

For the 471 U.S.-registered aircraft, the FAA estimates the initial external visual inspection will require approximately one labor hour per aircraft at an estimated cost of \$85 each, producing a combined cost of \$40,035 for U.S. operators.

More detailed visual and eddy-current inspections could require as many as four work hours per aircraft, at an estimated \$340 for each inspection cycle. If all 471 aircraft required that work, the estimated cost would reach as much as \$160,140 per cycle.

Those figures do not include the cost of repairing cracks or carrying out alternative inspections. The FAA said it does not yet have sufficient information to estimate those expenses.

For the Virgin Islands, the federal order is relevant primarily because aircraft from the broader 737 family are used in service connecting the territory with the mainland United States.

Southwest's entry into the St. Thomas market this year provides a current example. The airline began St. Thomas service on February 7, and its regulatory filings show that its entire operating fleet consists of Boeing 737 aircraft. At the end of 2025, that fleet included 305 737-700s, 198 737-800s and 300 Boeing 737-8 MAX aircraft.

Southwest's filings also describe MAX aircraft as central to its fleet-modernization plans. The company expected dozens of additional 737-8 deliveries during 2026.

For USVI passengers, however, the relevant distinction remains that not every Boeing 737 MAX is covered by the new directive, and the FAA has not announced that cracks were found on MAX aircraft traveling to the territory — or on MAX aircraft anywhere. The order is a preventive inspection requirement directed at specified airplanes because regulators believe their design leaves them potentially susceptible to a cracking problem already documented on older 737 models.

The directive, designated AD 2026-15-11, becomes effective September 10, 2026